



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

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Economics As If People Mattered

Easter 2, b, April 19, 2009

Acts 4:32-35

As we turn to our topic for the morning, let me say a word about the title of this sermon, *Economics As If People Mattered*. I hope some of you will recognize the phrase as the subtitle to an important book written by E. F. Schumacher in the 1973. I didn't use the full title of the book because I was afraid someone would think we were making a confusing allusion to our wonderful soloist of the morning, Mr. David Small. For the full title of the book is. *Small is Beautiful: The Study of Economics As If People Mattered*.

It is a strange but accurate title for what we find is that Economics is an emerging science that is a cross between mathematics & social psychology, but that in it matters of important human value are often totally ignored in the single-minded search for policies that will grow the availability of goods & services. And it is a prophetic concern in these days when as a nation and a world community we are focusing great interest on the sometimes very personal economics of the unfolding international financial collapse. But this morning as we head into the week when we will celebrate Earth Day, even in our concern for the broader economic matrix within which this financial collapse has occurred, let us not lose

sight of the finite and fragile web of natural life on which everything we value depends.

Now, in thinking about our scripture reading, I wonder how many of you have a history with this passage similar to mine. I'm sure that many of you grew up in the same way that I did with a high regard for the American economic engine that was providing prosperity for my family and friends. Do you also remember sitting in civics class staring down at the pages that talked about communism wondering why in the world people could have been so foolish as to have allowed that form of political economy to have overtaken them? Surely they must of have been hoodwinked into accepting it.

So it was a shock when as a 16 yr. old, newly committed to the Christian way when as I was reading my Bible I ran across this passage in Acts chapter 4,

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, **but everything they owned was held in common**.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was **distributed to each as any had need.**”

In civics class we had heard the strangely similar mantra popularized by Karl Marx, “from each according to his ability and to each according to his need”, and there it was in the Bible! Communism in the Bible? Even then I knew it would be a mistake to equate a communist economic system for an entire nation with the communal organization of a small band of Christian believers in Palestine, but nonetheless the seeds were sown of the recognition that our economic system in the United States was perhaps not based on the best values that we could adopt in face of God's claim on us.

I suspect that youngsters growing into their teens in this day and age probably do not need this Bible passage to shatter the illusion. It seems that every news broadcast that we see or hear has news of some environmental catastrophe brought on by human greed or human hubris-- where nature at least and most often other humans as well – suffer some pain, or loss, or dislocation because someone, or some corporation, or some nation sought their own gain without regard for all the rest of us who share that environment with them.ⁱ The negative effects of greed & lack of concern for others are painfully clear to this generation. As we face the challenging financial issues of our day, do you think our young people see the current financial trouble as just an occasional burp in a generally wonderful system, or would they say something more critical of the basic values inherent in our economic system?

This coming Sunday, April 26, we will as a congregation and community have an opportunity to delve into the more personal aspects of the spiritual side of these issues when we are privileged to welcome Dr. Steven Tomlinson to lead the Sunday afternoon workshop Spirituality in this Time of Economic Uncertainty.ⁱⁱ Dr. Tomlinson will help us focus on that personal side, so let us take a few minutes to consider some of the societal issues at stake.

Prof. Gary Dorrien, the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City summarizes our national economic history like this, “For over two centuries US American politics has featured two fundamentally different answers to the question what kind of country the U.S. should be. The first is the vision of a society that provides unrestricted liberty to acquire wealth. The second is the vision of a realized democracy in which rights over society’s major institutions are established. In the first view, the right to

property is lifted above the right to self-government, and the just society minimizes the equalizing role of government. In the second, self-government is considered superior to property, and a just society places democratic checks on social, political and economic power.”^{iiiiiv}Of late, he says, we’ve been swinging way over towards unrestricted liberty to acquire wealth.

Some time ago I was reading through Thomas Friedman's 2005 book, *The World Is Flat*. Those of you who have read the book know that Friedman celebrates the effectiveness and the efficiency of the globalized economy, what he calls “turbo-capitalism.” Friedman celebrates the unrivaled ascendancy of this hypercapitalism such that every nation that wants to have any positive stake in the future had better get on board that capitalist train. There is no second way, no third way. Every growing economy, Friedman says, will be wearing the “golden straitjacket” that: unleashes the private sector, keeps inflation low, minimizes government, eliminates tariffs, sustains a balanced budget, deregulates capital markets, and allows foreign ownership and investment.” After making those decisions, those interrelated decisions, Friedman points out that national politics doesn't matter much anymore. He asserts that once on that path our choices are reduced to Pepsi or Coke -- the very slight nuances of taste or policy that can respond to local tradition with a little adjustment here or there that doesn't really matter to the big picture. In this flat world Friedman recognizes - and to some degree bemoans - the wealth breeding ingenuity of the “electronic herd“ will certainly hold no place for any idealistic notions of social justice or economic democracy.

In his new book of last year *Hot, Flat and Crowded* Friedman refreshingly jumps on the ecological bandwagon, urging us to change our personal habits and to

elect leaders who'll green our nation and world. But sadly, he doesn't seem to take seriously enough the human selfishness at the heart of his beloved turbo-capitalism.

We American Christians have a tendency to join Friedman in closing our eyes to that which we don't want to see. So, instead of clamoring for basic economic system changes, we American Christians gather in front of our movie screens and watch movies like *Slum Dog Millionaire*, the rags to riches story of two Indian children trapped in intractable poverty who make a miraculous escape. The movie ends with throngs around them singing and dancing as the one time street urchin now turned millionaire and his beloved walk off into an alluring future. All this just distracts us from the brutal reality of millions of others, whom our Bible calls our neighbors, are born, grow up, live, and die without ever escaping those chains of poverty. We refuse to see what our blessed economic system creates!

Even now, in the throes of the current financial stress, even among Christians whose Christ consistently urged followers to stand with and stand for the poor - there is very little public conversation of any alternative to globalized turbo-capitalism. Especially since the communist model was discredited, what other options are there? What else can we do?

Let me suggest as Christians we are seeking an economic model that elevates the value of each human being -- which is clearly sound biblical principle. Then there necessarily needs to be an emphasis on the rights of each and every individual, "economics as if people [not just capital] really matter." Add to that the reality we are only beginning to absorb, that this planet earth is finite; therefore

when we thoughtlessly take the carbon out of the ground, burn it and spew it into the air:

not only do we set the stage to run out of oil and coal and natural gas;

not only do we get closer to the day when they will not be available to us and thus raise prices for us and so much more difficultly for the poorest of the poor;

not only do we saddle our descendents with fewer options to sustain a life of economic quality;

but we create and wrap ourselves in this invisible blanket of CO₂ that has this week been finally governmentally judged dangerous to our health, because it raises the temperature of the Earth's atmosphere which has all kinds of unintended and overwhelmingly negative consequences, health and otherwise.

Let us remember that Gen. 2 gives humanity a clear job description, to be caring and just stewards of the world as God's agent, "The Lord God placed the human in the garden of Eden to till and keep it."

Instead, we have an economic model that currently depends upon incessant growth even when we rationally recognize that we can't even sustain the level that we are currently are at in terms of resources and in terms of a livable environment! As Prof. Dorrien reminds us, only 16% of the world could possibly expect to live as well off as we Americans do today because the Earth's resources are finite.

No, as Christians first - before we are consumers, before we are Americans - as Christians first, we will understand that all this earth is God's, and that - as the Scripture says, we have everything in common. Our concern should be for the

Whole Earth, for its sustainability and especially for her human inhabitants.
Commonwealth.

To what economic system will this line of thinking draw us? Let me suggest that any particular economic policy or system that we as Christians should embrace moving forward will:

not be based on the current fantasy that the earth's resources are limitless;
nor be based on a fantasy that a rising tide lifts all ships in human society, at least as long as there is such an overweening human proclivity to greed.

Let me suggest that whatever just economic system we evolve moving forward must not allow any of us to spoil the Commonwealth, and I'll be specific now, the air we breathe, the water we'll drink & the public lands we inhabit, not allow us to use this Commonwealth as a cesspool.

This is no time to sit idly by. The earth's sustainability itself & the shape of the human future are at stake. Christians bearing the flag of justice – including economic justice- in search of a lasting peace must find ways to act as God's stewards here, to become of the leaven of the loaf, to become the mustard seed of the Kingdom of God. In doing so, we may well need to leave behind previous economic assumptions that won't work any more.

It'll be an incredible challenge, a steep uphill climb, but for the welfare of all the Earth- which is our charge- we have no choice other than to use our ingenuity, our imagination, to finding just & compassionate solutions for this conundrum. For the sake of all future generations, may the Lord bless our efforts with success.
Amen.

ⁱ . Today's young people have no doubt seen and understood that ecology, which means the reason or the logic of the household Earth, needs to be more wholesomely related to the economy, the rule of household Earth.ⁱ

ⁱⁱ For more information, see <http://ucc-austin.org/forums/index.html> <http://ucc-austin.org/forums/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ From p. 7 of an unpublished paper entitled "Economic Globalization and the Global Crash: A Case for Economic Democracy."

^{iv} Prof. Dorrien traces through all of American history showing the pendulum swing between these two poles of unrestricted capitalism on the one hand and economic democracy on the other. Recently we have reached one extreme of the pendulum swings towards unrestricted capitalism at the same time in which Prof. Dorrien says we've experienced the crest of the the second great wave of globalization (the first having been experienced in the 1870s through the 1930s). It is reasonable to understand that the communist revolutions in the Soviet Union and China were in part reactions to the first wave of globalization. We can certainly expect some kind of reaction to the second wave as well. We don't know the form that it will take, but the readiness of the Bush administration in its final months and the Obama administration in its opening months to pour public resources into financial institution rescues demonstrates a lack of faith in the ability of red- in-tooth- and- claw capitalism to most efficiently bring us out of the current economic tailspin.

^v See Paul Krugman's article at <http://mailman1.u.washington.edu/pipermail/pophealth/2003-December/000770.html>

"According to estimates by the economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez--confirmed by data from the Congressional Budget Office--between 1973 and 2000 the average real income of the bottom 90 percent of American taxpayers actually fell by 7 percent. Meanwhile, the income of the top 1 percent rose by 148 percent, the income of the top 0.1 percent rose by 343 percent and the income of the top 0.01 percent rose 599 percent. (Those numbers exclude capital gains, so they're not an artifact of the stock-market bubble.) The distribution of income in the United States has gone right back to Gilded Age levels of inequality."